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ABSTRACT

This report, part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) survey, describes one facet of the national assessment of writing. The students--9-, 13-, and 17-year-olds who constitute the sample for the NAEP studies--were told to use their best writing but were not told that their papers would be examined for mechanical correctness. The data on mechanical correctness obtained from an examination of these papers during the 1974 survey are compared with the data obtained from the 1970 assessment. Richard Lloyd-Jones of the University of Iowa (Iowa City) and Ross Winterowd of the University of Southern California (Los Angeles) offered the following observations about the writing assessment results: there is no evidence that the schools must "go back to basics" because the basics seem well in hand; language is always changing, but new ways of writing may not be worse in any defensible sense; writing is inextricably tied to reading; "Edited Standard English" as taught in most schools is one dialect of English; there are fewer rewards for being a good writer; and increasing class size results in fewer writing assignments. (RB)

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NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS

WRITING MECHANICS, 1969–1974:

A Capsule Description of Changes in Writing Mechanics

Writing Report No. 05-W-01

1973–74 Assessment

October 1975

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FOREWORD

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is an information-gathering project which surveys the educational attainments of 9-year-olds, 13-year-olds, 17-year-olds and adults (ages 26—35) in 10 learning areas: art, career and occupational development, citizenship, literature, mathematics, music, reading, science, social studies and writing. Different learning areas are assessed every year, and all areas are periodically reassessed in order to measure educational change.

Each assessment is the product of several years work by a great many educators, scholars and lay persons from all over the country. Initially, these people design objectives for each area, proposing specific goals which they feel Americans should be achieving in the course of their education. After careful reviews, these objectives are then given to exercise (item) writers, whose task it is to create measurement tools appropriate to the objectives.

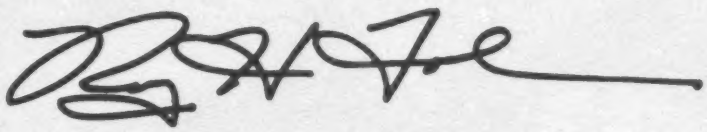
When the exercises have passed extensive reviews by subject-matter specialists and measurement experts, they are administered to probability samples from various age levels. The people who comprise these samples are chosen in such a way that the results of their assessment can be generalized to an entire national population. That is, on the basis of the performance of about 2,500 9-year-olds on a given exercise, we can generalize about the probable performance of all 9-year-olds in the nation.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress also publishes a general information yearbook which describes all major aspects of the Assessment's operation. The reader who desires more detailed information about how NAEP defines its groups, prepares and scores its exercises, designs its samples and analyzes and reports its results should consult the *General Information Yearbook, Report 03/04-GIY.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have made substantial contributions to the two writing assessments and to the writing mechanics studies conducted to date. Not the least of those to be gratefully acknowledged are the administrators, teachers and students who cooperated so generously in making the assessment possible. Particular thanks for this report go to Wendy Littlefair, who made major contributions to the development of scoring guides, the resolution of scoring problems and the review of this manuscript; Michael O'Hara, who also contributed heavily to the development of scoring procedures; Ginny Bordwell of Measurement Research Center, who supervised the mechanics scoring; Richard Lloyd-Jones and Ross Winterowd, who critiqued the report and speculated on its implications; and Ina Mullis, the overseer of this study for the last two years.

The actual preparation of this report was a collaborative effort of the National Assessment of Educational Progress staff. Special thanks go to Judy Bellows and Felice Blum of the Data Processing Department; Ava Powell of Research and Analysis; and Marci Reser and Eileen Wollam of the Utilization/Applications Department. Ina Mullis developed the analysis procedures for the report and Rexford Brown wrote it.



Roy H. Forbes
Project Director

CHAPTER 1

ABSTRACT OF RESULTS

17-Year-Olds

1. There was an overall decline in the quality of the essays written for the second assessment: the mean holistic score dropped from 5.12 in 1969 to 4.85 in 1974, and the percentage of 17-year-olds writing papers ranked 4 or better declined from 85% to 78%.

2. Increases in awkwardness, run-on sentences and incoherent paragraphs most likely reduced the overall quality of the essays. Reduced coherence implies a diminishing of traditional organizational and transitional skills; awkwardness and the increase in run-ons suggest uneasiness with the conventions of written language. All of these changes point to a movement away from established writing conventions toward those of spoken discourse. More 17-year-olds may be writing as they speak.

3. In general, most of those aspects of writing generally called "mechanics" and stressed heavily in elementary and junior high school English classes (e.g., punctuation, capitalization, agreement, spelling, word usage and so on) are being handled adequately by the vast majority of students, and there is no evidence of deterioration in their use.

4. Good writers are as good as they were — i.e., have the same mean holistic score — and there may be a few more of them than there were in 1969.

5. Good writers are writing longer essays without losing coherence or increasing their error rates in such areas as punctuation, word choice, spelling, run-ons, fragments and so on.

6. Good essays contain about the same mixture of simple, compound and complex sentences and about the same proportion of sentences with phrases; they continue to contain only one spelling error in every 100 words.

7. Poor writers are worse than they were — i.e., have a lower mean holistic score — and there are more of them than there were in 1969.

8. Poor writers are writing shorter, less stylistically sophisticated essays but retaining about the same error rates — in effect, increasing their proportion of errors.

9. More poor essays are incoherent than were in 1969.

10. Poor writers are getting poorer, then, in those skills that are specific to written communication but seldom called for in conversation; that are acquired largely through broad reading and considerable rewriting; that are most seldom taught and, when taught, are most difficult to teach, especially to poor readers and people who have little use for printed communication.

13-Year-Olds

1. There was an overall decline in the quality of the essays written for the

second assessment: the mean holistic score dropped from 5.0 in 1969 to 4.7 in 1973, and the percentage of 13-year-olds writing papers ranked 4 or better declined from 79.6% to 76.6%.

2. The proportion of very good writers dropped from 19% to 13%.

3. There is a movement toward shorter, simpler expression. The essays were shorter in 1973 and contained fewer sentences with phrases. In other words, the students used less amplification and modification.

4. The vocabulary employed in 1973 was somewhat simpler.

5. There is a marked increase, particularly among males, in rambling prose, i.e., somewhat unfocused writing containing more run-on sentences and more awkwardness than was evident in 1969.

6. Most 13-year-olds commit at least one comma error in their essays.

7. More 13-year-olds are attempting to spell phonetically words they do not know.

9-Year-Olds

1. The proportion of 9-year-olds writing papers ranked 4 or better rose from 51% in 1970 to 57% in 1974. The quality of the average essay written by a 9-year-old remained much the same between 1970 and 1974 and may actually have improved a bit.

2. The average paper in 1974 contains more complex sentences than the average paper in 1970, but it has lost paragraph coherence. In other words, 9-year-olds seem to be moving toward more sophisticated writing, with mixed success. Trying to do more, they are risking more.

3. Most 9-year-old essays are free of run-on sentences, agreement errors, comma errors, period errors, word-choice errors and structure word errors.

4. Very few 9-year-olds write fully developed paragraphs focusing on a topic sentence, and the percentage is decreasing. The most rapid decrease is among the high-ranking papers.

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND

The Design of the Study

The first national assessment of writing was administered to 17-year-olds in the spring of 1969, to 13-year-olds in the fall of 1969 and to 9-year-olds in the winter of 1970. The second assessment was administered four years later to 9- and 13-year-olds and five years later (spring of 1974) to 17-year-olds. Although both assessments consisted of a number of survey questions, multiple-choice and essay tasks, this report deals with only one of the essay tasks that was required in both assessments. That exercise, reproduced in Appendix A, was scored in ways that enable us to evaluate and analyze the characteristics of the essays and compare the writing of two equivalent samples of people at two points in time.[1]

The scoring involved two different approaches to the papers.

First, the essays were scored "holistically" — a term derived from this method's emphasis on a reader's response to the *whole* essay rather than to such aspects of it as style, content, mechanics and so on. Holistic scoring has long been used to evaluate essays written for the College Boards and many other college entrance examinations. For each age level the sample of 1969 papers was randomly mixed with the sample of 1974 papers. There was no way a scorer could determine whether he was reading a 1969 or a 1974 paper. Readers, all of them experienced English teachers, were trained in the usual fashion by rating training papers — i.e., papers exemplifying each score point from 1 (the lowest quality score) to 8 — until they had internalized the scoring system. Then each read an essay and gave it a score from 1 to 8.

The second scoring approach was descriptive, rather than evaluative. Another group of English teachers — all with considerable experience in grammar and linguistics — examined each essay according to the scoring guide in Appendix B. These readers coded each paragraph and sentence for its type (simple sentence, complex sentence with phrase, fragment, etc.) and coded each mechanical error found (comma used when none required, no comma when required, phonetic misspelling, fused sentences, etc.). The essays and the codes were keypunched and a computer tabulated the results.

The nature of holistic scoring is such that one never knows precisely why a paper received the rating it did; the scorers themselves do not reflect on their decisions, only knowing that a particular paper is better than some but not as good as others. Consequently, this method of scoring provides a very reliable ranking of essays — a ranking most trained readers would endorse — but it tells us nothing about the papers except that some are better than others.

Descriptive scoring of essays provides considerable information about essays, but it does not tell anyone how *good* a particular essay is when read. This study combines both systems in order to characterize specific writing

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[1] Information about sample selection and other aspects of the writing assessments appears in National Assessment writing reports No. 3, 5, 8 and 10, and the *General Information Yearbook, Report 03/04-GIY* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974).

accomplishments at three age levels more fully than either approach alone can do it. It cannot be said that a high-quality paper (7 or 8) received that score *because* of the mechanical characteristics it possesses; it can be said, however, that high-quality papers as a group possess certain characteristics and low-quality papers as a group possess certain other characteristics and that these, along with other factors, have some relation to their ratings.

The Limitations of the Study

This report describes only one facet of the national assessment of writing. It deals with one particular writing task performed under one particular set of circumstances and in no way constitutes a definitive study of writing in the largest sense of that word. The students who participated in this exercise were told to use their best writing but were not told that their papers would be examined for mechanical correctness. Future National Assessment reports will deal with those exercises designed to assess rewriting skills, and still other reports will analyze different kinds of writing in various ways.

CHAPTER 3

HOW TO READ THE TABLES

This study generated far more data than the average reader would wish to see. Since all the data will eventually be available to researchers and scholars we have limited the figures in this report to only the most salient. Nonetheless, there are many numbers to look at and ponder over and it is important to understand exactly what they represent.

Some readers may be confused by the footnote accompanying most tables explaining that asterisked numbers are "statistically significant." This means, statistically, that we are 95% confident that these differences are real and not a chance artifact of the study design or the sample. Many results may be important even though they are not statistically significant; conversely, statistically significant results need not be educationally important. It is up to each reader to make these judgments.

The tables labeled "counts" (Tables 1, 5, 8, 11, 15, 18, 21, 25, 28) are straightforward counts of the numbers of words, sentences and so on averaged over essays. If, as in Table 5, the object is to compare poor and good essays, the numbers represent the average counts for the poor-quality (holistically rated 1, 2 or 3) essays and the good quality (holistically rated 7 or 8) essays.

The tables labeled "sentences" (Tables 2, 6, 9, 12, 16, 19, 22, 26, 29) display the average numbers of various kinds of sentences in the essays and the average percentage across essays each of those kinds of sentences comprise. Table 2, for instance, reveals that the essays averaged 4.6 simple sentences in 1969, and those 4.6 sentences account for 49% of the sentences in the essay. The first five categories in these tables add up to the total number of sentences in the essay and to 100%. The remaining four categories are not additive.

The tables displaying coherence figures (Tables 3, 13, 23) present the average number of coherent paragraphs per essay and the average percentage that number represents of the total number of paragraphs written. Table 3 reveals that, in 1969, a paper written by a 17-year-old contained an average of 1.5 coherent paragraphs and that 85% of the paragraphs in the paper were coherent. Put another way, 85% of the paragraphs the hypothetical average 17-year-old wrote in 1969 were coherent.

The tables labeled "spelling and word-choice errors" (Tables 4, 7, 10, 14, 17, 20, 24, 27, 30) also present averages. Table 4 reveals that in 1969 the papers contained 3.1 spelling errors on the average and that this represents 2.5% of all the words the writer used in the essay.

Each chapter approaches the essays from several points of view. First, it uses these computed averages discussed above to describe a hypothetical "average" paper — a useful construct, but insufficient in itself. Then it examines the essays as a group to convey a sense of the diversity of performance the students displayed. It is useful to know that the average essay contained nine sentences, but it is important also to note that 20% of the papers were shorter than four sentences in length. To further underscore the diversity, each chapter also presents a contrast of the poor and good essays and a comparison of male and female writing performance.

CHAPTER 4

17-YEAR-OLDS

A Profile of the Average Essay Written by a 17-Year-Old in 1974

Tables 1—4 display some of the characteristics of the average paper written at age 17 in 1974. It is 137 words long, is composed of about nine sentences averaging 16 words in length, and is organized in two paragraphs that are coherent but not well developed. Half the sentences used are simple sentences, about three-fourths of which include phrases. A third of the sentences used are complex and most of them contain phrases. Only 6% of the sentences written are compound sentences. Table 2 reveals that of the nine sentences in the average paper, four or five are simple sentences, three are complex sentences and the remainder is either a compound sentence, a run-on or a fragment. If these figures are translated into percentages, then it is likely that 48% of the sentences in the average essay will be simple sentences, 31% will be complex, 10% will be run-ons, 6% will be compound sentences and 5% will be incorrectly used sentence fragments. The average 17-year-old misspells about 3% of the words he or she writes, and the average word length is four letters.

Three out of every 4 paragraphs in the average essay are coherent, i.e., are consistent in their use of topic tense and time (Table 3). Only 1 paragraph in every 10 is fully developed, i.e., has one central area of concern and each sentence represents an orderly addition or explanation of that concern.

TABLE 1. Average Essay Written by 17-Year-Olds, Counts

	1969	1974	Change
Average holistic score	5.1	4.9	-0.2*
Average number of words/essay	137.1	137.2	0.1
Average number of sentences/essay	9.1	9.4	0.3
Average number of paragraphs/essay	1.9	1.8	-0.1
Average number of punctuation marks	15.3	16.0	0.7
Average number of letters/word	4.2	4.1	-0.1*
Average number of words/sentence	16.5	15.9	-0.6
Average number of words/paragraph	93.3	97.3	4.0
Average number of sentences/paragraph	6.1	6.7	0.6

**Differences that are statistically significant are indicated by asterisks.*

TABLE 2. Average Essay Written by 17-Year-Olds, Sentences

	1969		1974		Change	
	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay
Simple sentences	4.6	49%	4.9	48%	0.3	-1%
Compound sentences	0.5	5	0.5	6	+†	1
Complex sentences	3.1	35	3.0	31	-0.1	-4
Run-ons	0.4	7	0.6	10	0.2*	3*
Fragments (incorrect)	0.4	4	0.4	5	0.0	1
Sentences with phrases	6.9	76	6.8	70	-0.1	-6*
Simple sentences with phrases	3.7	40	3.9	38	0.2	-2
Complex sentences with phrases	2.8	31	2.5	26	-0.3	-5*
Awkward sentences	1.3	16	1.4	18	0.1	2

**Differences that are statistically significant are indicated by asterisks.*
†Plus sign equals rounded number less than 0.05.

TABLE 3. Coherent Paragraphs, Age 17

	1969		1974	
	Average Number	Average Percent	Average Number	Average Percent
National	1.5	85%	1.3*	76%*
Male	1.4	87	1.2*	75*
Female	1.6	84	1.3*	78
Low quality	1.0	83	0.6*	56*
High quality	1.7	87	1.8	86

**Difference from 1969 is statistically significant.*

Changes in the Average Paper

In 1974, the average paper was of lower quality than the 1969 version, the mean holistic score dropping .25 score points (see Exhibit 1). Although the average essays were the same length in both years, the more recent one employed fewer words longer than four letters — in other words, the vocabulary became somewhat simpler. In addition, the 1974 essay contained smaller proportions of complex sentences with phrases, while exhibiting a higher proportion of run-on sentences (see Exhibit 2).

EXHIBIT 1. Percentages of 17-Year-Olds at Each Holistic Score Point, 1969 and 1974

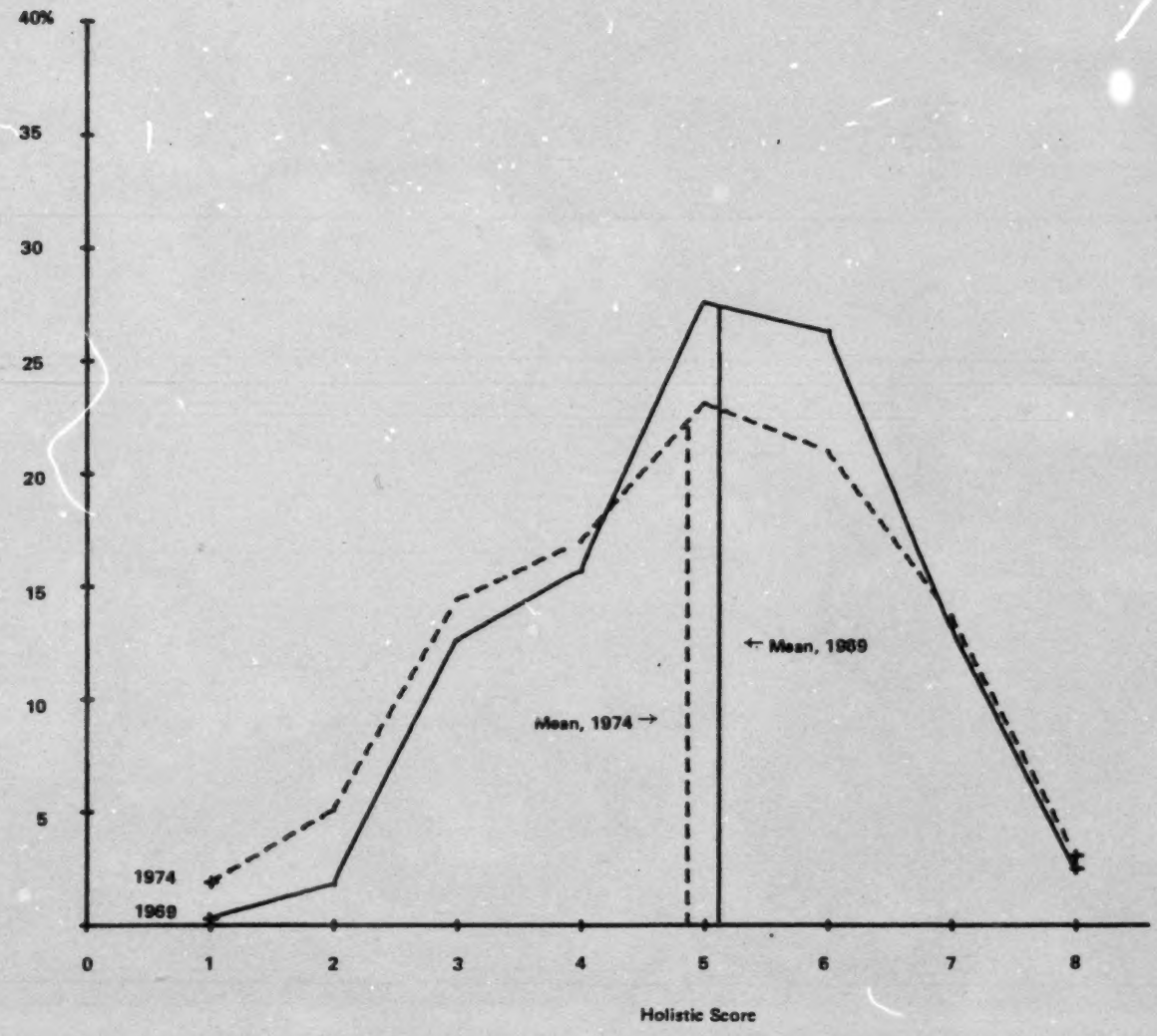
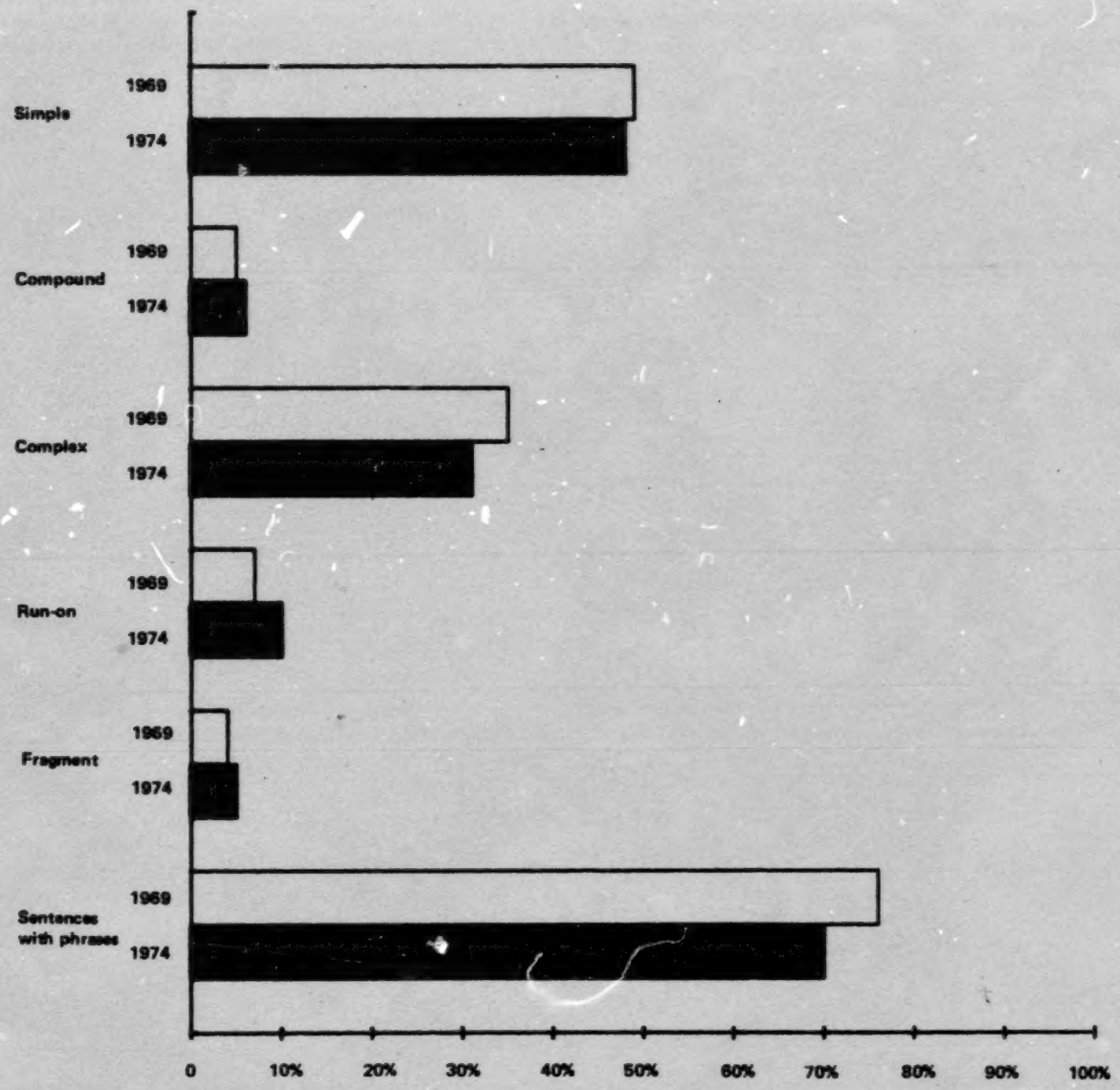


EXHIBIT 2. Percentages of Sentence Types, 1969 and 1974, 17-Year-Olds



In 1969, 85% of the paragraphs in an average essay were coherent, but by 1974 this declined to 76%. Almost all of this decline was caused by the incoherence of the poor-quality papers (Table 3).

Although we cannot say that these changes definitely caused the decrease in quality represented by the drop in holistic score, it is reasonable to assume that they did indirectly. The changes in proportions of sentence types

and uses of phrases point to a slight shift toward simpler constructions and, simultaneously, a greater carelessness in the handling of those constructions. These shifts would negatively influence most readers.

It is important to note some characteristics of essays that have *not* changed in the average essay: agreement errors continue to crop up in about 1 out of every 10 sentences; comma splices occur only 5% of the time; the use of dashes, quotation marks, question marks, exclamation points, colons, semicolons or parentheses has remained constant and almost negligible; errors in the use of commas, periods, dashes, quotation marks, exclamation points, colons, semicolons and parentheses are extremely rare; misspelling in general is not on the increase, although there do seem to be some problems spelling plurals; the same slight proportion (3%) of the words written are misspelled in both years; word-choice and structure errors remain infrequent and display no change in either direction (Table 4). It seems, then, that most of the "mechanics" are well in hand.

TABLE 4. Average Essay Written by 17-Year-Olds, Spelling and Word-Choice Errors

	1969	1974	Change
Average number of misspelled words	3.1	3.4	0.3
Average percent of misspelled words	2.5%	3.0%	0.5%
Average number of word-choice errors	0.7	0.6	-0.1
Average percent of word-choice errors	0.6%	0.6%	0.0%

The Range of the Essays

The "average essay" can be a useful construct, but it is important to examine the characteristics of the entire range of essays. In doing so we discover a number of interesting things.

- To begin with, the shift in holistic score occurred just below the center of the distribution of scores: in 1974 there were more papers rated 2, 3 or 4 and fewer rated 5 and 6 than in 1969 (Exhibit 3).
- The words per essay in each assessment remained the same for the average essay; but in 1974, twice as many papers were greater than 200 words in length, and almost twice as many were shorter than 100 words. Clearly, the students are not responding to the task as uniformly as they once did.
- In 1969, 13% of the papers were shorter than four sentences; in 1974, 20% of them were.
- In 1969, 54% of the essays contained only one paragraph; in 1974, the proportion was 62%. Thus, 1974's short essays are shorter than 1969's. The long essays and the high-quality essays (7s and 8s) are even longer.
- Although in both years the average essay had a 50/50 chance of containing a compound sentence, two-thirds of the essays contained no compound sentences at all.
- In both assessments, one-eighth of the students used no complex sentences in their essays.
- Whereas in 1969, 71% of the essays contained no run-ons and 37% had no awkward sentences, the percentages now are 64% and 30%.

Another way to grasp the range of the papers is to examine the poor (rated 1, 2, 3) and good (7, 8) essays (Tables 5—7). The change in holistic score is important to note: the

EXHIBIT 3. Changes in Essay Ratings, Age 17

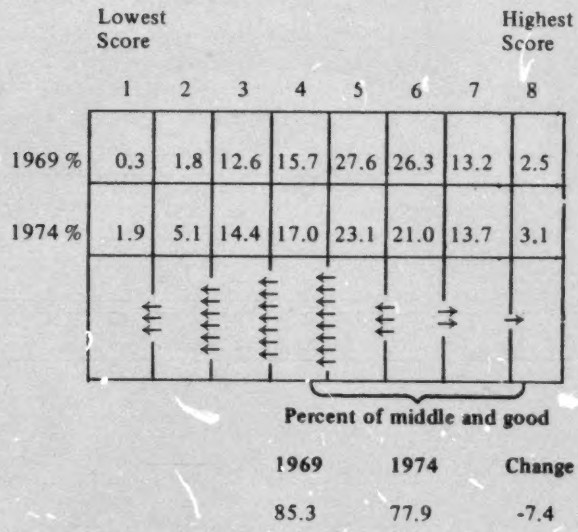


TABLE 5. Average Poor and Good Essays Written by 17-Year-Olds, Counts

	1969		1974		Change	
	Poor	Good	Poor	Good	Poor	Good
Average holistic score	2.8	7.2	2.6	7.2	-0.2*	++
Average number of words/essay	74.7	176.4	67.3	218.6	-7.4	42.2*
Average number of sentences/essay	5.2	11.2	4.4	14.3	-0.8	3.1*
Average number of paragraphs/essay	1.4	2.1	1.1	2.2	-0.3	0.1
Average number of punctuation marks	7.6	19.4	7.2	26.9	-0.4	7.5*
Average number of letters/word	4.0	4.3	3.9	4.3	-0.1	++
Average number of words/sentence	16.6	16.6	18.1	16.3	1.5	- 0.3
Average number of words/paragraph	61.9	115.3	63.6	135.3	1.7	20.0
Average number of sentences/paragraph	4.3	7.1	4.2	8.9	-0.1	1.8

**Differences that are statistically significant are indicated by asterisks.*
†Plus signs equal rounded numbers less than 0.05 and rounded percents less than 0.5.

TABLE 6. Average Poor and Good Essays Written by 17-Year-Olds, Sentences

	1969				1974				Change			
	Poor		Good		Poor		Good		Poor		Good	
	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay
Simple sentences	2.8	48%	5.1	47%	2.1	40%	7.3	49%	-0.7	-8%	2.2*	2%
Compound sentences	0.3	5	0.6	6	0.2	6	0.7	5	-0.1	1	0.1	-1
Complex sentences	1.2	25	4.1	37	1.0	25	5.2	38	-0.2	+†	1.1*	1
Run-ons	0.6	14	0.3	3	[illegible]		0.4	4	0.1	6	0.1	1
Fragments (incorrect)	0.4	7	1.0	6	0.4	9	0.5	3	+†	2	-0.5	-3
Sentences with phrases	3.2	63	8.7	81	2.6	55	11.0	78	-0.6	-8	2.3*	-3
Simple sentences with phrases	2.0	36	4.5	41	1.6	29	5.9	40	-0.4	-7	1.4*	-1
Complex sentences with phrases	1.0	21	3.7	34	0.9	21	4.5	34	-0.1	+†	0.8	+†
Awkward sentences	1.3	24	1.0	9	1.0	26	1.6	12	-0.3	2	0.6*	3

**Differences that are statistically significant are indicated by asterisks.*
†Plus sign equals rounded numbers less than 0.05 and rounded percents less than 0.5.

TABLE 7. Average Poor and Good Essays Written by 17-Year-Olds, Spelling and Word-Choice Errors

	1969		1974		Change	
	Poor	Good	Poor	Good	Poor	Good
Average number of misspelled words	4.3	2.2	3.9	2.6	-0.4	0.4
Average percent of misspelled words	5.5%	1.3%	5.2%	1.2%	-0.3%	-0.1%
Average number of word-choice errors	0.9	0.7	0.8	0.7	-0.1	+†
Average percent of word-choice errors	1.0%	0.5%	1.2%	0.3%	0.2%	-0.2%

†Plus sign equals rounded number less than 0.05.

mean holistic score for good essays stayed the same, but it declined for the poor essays. In other words, high-quality essays are as good as ever; low-quality essays are worse. The gap between the good writer and the poor writer is widening. The good paper is now almost four times as long as the poor, both in terms of number of words and number of sentences. The difference in average word length indicates a richer vocabulary for good papers. The better papers are considerably more sophisticated in their composition: they employ much more punctuation and considerably more complex sentences and sentences with phrases — and the four-year trend among good papers is toward greater sophistication. Good papers contain one-fifth the proportion of run-ons and misspellings and less than half as much awkwardness as the poor papers.

Male-Female Differences

The holistic scores for both sexes dropped between assessments with the result that 1974's young women were still writing better essays than the young men, but their mean holistic score (5.0) was about the same as that of 1969's young men. The average female continues to write longer essays than the average male, fewer run-ons, awkward sentences and more sentences with phrases; she also spells somewhat better (refer to Tables 8—10).

In 1974, a greater proportion of males (probably those writing low-quality essays) wrote run-on sentences. In addition, a smaller proportion of them wrote sentences containing phrases.

TABLE 8. Average Essays Written by Male and Female 17-Year-Olds, Counts

	1969		1974		Change	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Average holistic score	4.9	5.3	4.7	5.0	-0.2	-0.3
Average number of words/essay	132.8	140.8	128.8	143.6	-4.0	2.8
Average number of sentences/essay	8.6	9.5	8.7	10.0	0.1	0.5
Average number of paragraphs/essay	1.7	2.1	1.7	1.8	+†	-0.3
Average number of punctuation marks	14.5	16.1	13.8	17.7	-0.7	1.6
Average number of letters/word	4.2	4.2	4.1	4.1	-0.1	-0.1*
Average number of words/sentence	17.1	16.0	17.1	15.0	+†	-1.0
Average number of words/paragraph	95.3	91.4	91.9	101.4	-3.4	10.0
Average number of sentences/paragraph	6.2	6.0	6.2	7.1	+†	1.0*

** Differences that are statistically significant are indicated by asterisks.*
† Plus signs equal rounded numbers less than 0.05.

TABLE 9. Average Essays Written by Male and Female 17-Year-Olds, Sentences

	1969				1974				Change			
	Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female	
	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay
Simple sentences	4.7	51%	4.5	46%	4.4	46%	5.2	49%	-0.3	- 5%	0.7	3%
Compound sentences	0.4	5	0.6	6	0.5	6	0.6	6	0.1	1	+†	+†
Complex sentences	2.8	32	3.4	37	2.7	30	3.2	32	-0.1	- 2	-0.2	-5
Run-ons	0.4	7	0.5	6	0.6	13	0.6	7	0.2*	6*	0.1	1
Fragments (incorrect)	0.3	4	0.5	4	0.4	6	0.4	4	0.1	2	-0.1	+†
Sentences with phrases	6.7	76	7.1	76	6.3	66	7.2	72	-0.4	-10*	0.1	-4
Simple sentences with phrases	3.9	43	3.6	38	3.6	38	4.1	39	-0.3	- 5	0.5	1
Complex sentences with phrases	2.5	29	3.0	33	2.3	24	2.7	28	-0.2	- 5	-0.3	-5
Awkward sentences	1.3	17	1.3	15	1.4	20	1.4	16	0.1	3	0.1	1

**Differences that are statistically significant are indicated by asterisks.*
†Plus sign equals rounded numbers less than 0.05 and rounded percents less than 0.5.

TABLE 10. Average Essays Written by Male and Female 17-Year-Olds, Spelling and Word-Choice Errors

	1969		1974		Change	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Average number of misspelled words	3.6	2.6	4.2	2.8	0.6	0.2
Average percent of misspelled words	3.1%	2.0%	4.0%	2.2%	0.9%	0.2%
Average number of word-choice errors	0.7	0.8	0.5	0.7	-0.2	-0.1
Average percent of word-choice errors	0.6%	0.6%	0.5%	0.7%	-0.1%	0.1%

CHAPTER 5

13-YEAR-OLDS

A Profile of the Average Essay Written by a 13-Year-Old in 1973

Tables 11—14 display some of the characteristics of the average paper written by a 13-year-old in the 1973—74 school year. It is 128 words long, is composed of nine sentences averaging 17 words per sentence and is organized in about one and one-half paragraphs. Of the nine sentences in the average essay, about five are simple sentences, two or three are complex, one or two may be compound and one is a run-on sentence. If these figures are translated into percentages, then 46% of the sentences in the average essay are likely to be simple, 7% compound, 24% complex, 18% run-ons and 5% fragments. About half of the sentences written contain phrases of some kind, and about a third of the sentences written are awkwardly constructed. Three-fourths of the paragraphs the hypothetical, average 13-year-old writes are coherent; but only one in seven is fully developed.

The average essay contains one agreement error, two comma errors (out of three comma uses), one apostrophe error and one word-choice error. It is barren of semicolons, colons, dashes and parentheses.

TABLE 11. Average Essay Written by 13-Year-Olds, Counts

	1969	1973	Change
Average holistic score	5.0	4.7	- 0.3*
Average number of words/essay	145.1	128.5	-16.6*
Average number of sentences/essay	10.5	9.3	- 1.2*
Average number of paragraphs/essay	2.1	1.6	- 0.5*
Average number of punctuation marks	15.8	14.2	- 1.6
Average number of letters/word	4.0	3.9	- 0.1*
Average number of words/sentence	15.9	17.2	1.3
Average number of words/paragraph	96.1	100.4	4.3
Average number of sentences/paragraph	7.1	7.2	0.1

**Differences that are statistically significant are indicated by asterisks.*

TABLE 12. Average Essay Written by 13-Year-Olds, Sentences

	1969		1973		Change	
	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay
Simple sentences	5.3	47%	4.8	46%	-0.5	-1%
Compound sentences	0.7	6	0.6	7	-0.1	1
Complex sentences	3.3	31	2.5	24	-0.8*	-7*
Run-ons	0.8	13	1.0	18	0.2	5*
Fragments (incorrect)	0.3	3	0.3	5	+†	2
Sentences with phrases	7.1	64	5.8	56	-1.3*	-8*
Simple sentences with phrases	3.9	34	3.3	32	-0.6*	-2
Complex sentences with phrases	2.7	25	2.0	19	-0.7*	-6*
Awkward sentences	1.8	21	2.3	31	0.5*	10*

**Differences that are statistically significant are indicated by asterisks.*
†Plus sign equals rounded numbers less than 0.05.

TABLE 13. Coherent Paragraphs, Age 13

	1969		1973	
	Average Number	Average Percent	Average Number	Average Percent
National	1.4	75%	1.1*	78%
Male	1.3	76	1.0*	76
Female	1.5	73	1.3	79
Low quality	0.4	36	0.5	50*
High quality	2.3	82	2.0	83

**Difference from 1969 is statistically significant.*

Changes in the Average Paper

In 1973, the average essay was of lower quality than in 1969, the mean holistic score dropping from 5.0 to 4.7 and the proportion of papers ranked 4 or better dropping from 79.6 to 76.6 (Exhibit 4). The essay was 17 words, or one sentence, shorter; its vocabulary, as measured by the mean letters per word, was simpler; it consisted of 7% fewer complex sentences, 5% more run-on sentences and 2% more fragments; it contained fewer sentences with phrases (thus, was less sophisticated) and 10% more awkward sentences (Exhibit 5).

In 1969, three out of every four paragraphs in the average paper were coherent (Table 13). That proportion did not change in 1973, although the average 13-year-old was writing fewer paragraphs by that time.

Spelling did not change during this period; however, there was a slight increase in misspelling of plurals and an increase in the percentage of misspellings that reflected an attempt to sound the word out. Apparently, phonetic approaches to spelling have had an impact on this age level.

There were no changes in number of agreement errors, fused sentences, comma splices, apostrophes, dashes, semicolons, comma errors, period errors, spelling errors, word-choice errors or structure word errors.

The 1973 average paper was shorter, less sophisticated in expression and more awkwardly written than the 1969 paper. These features probably account for the drop in mean holistic score.

TABLE 14. Average Essay Written by 13-Year-Olds, Spelling and Word-Choice Errors

	1969	1973	Change
Average number of misspelled words	5.0	5.3	0.3
Average percent of misspelled words	4.1%	4.8%	0.7%
Average number of word-choice errors	0.9	0.8	-0.1
Average percent of word-choice errors	0.7%	0.7%	+†

†Plus sign equals rounded percent less than 0.05.

EXHIBIT 4. Percentages of 13-Year-Olds at Each Holistic Score Point, 1969 and 1973

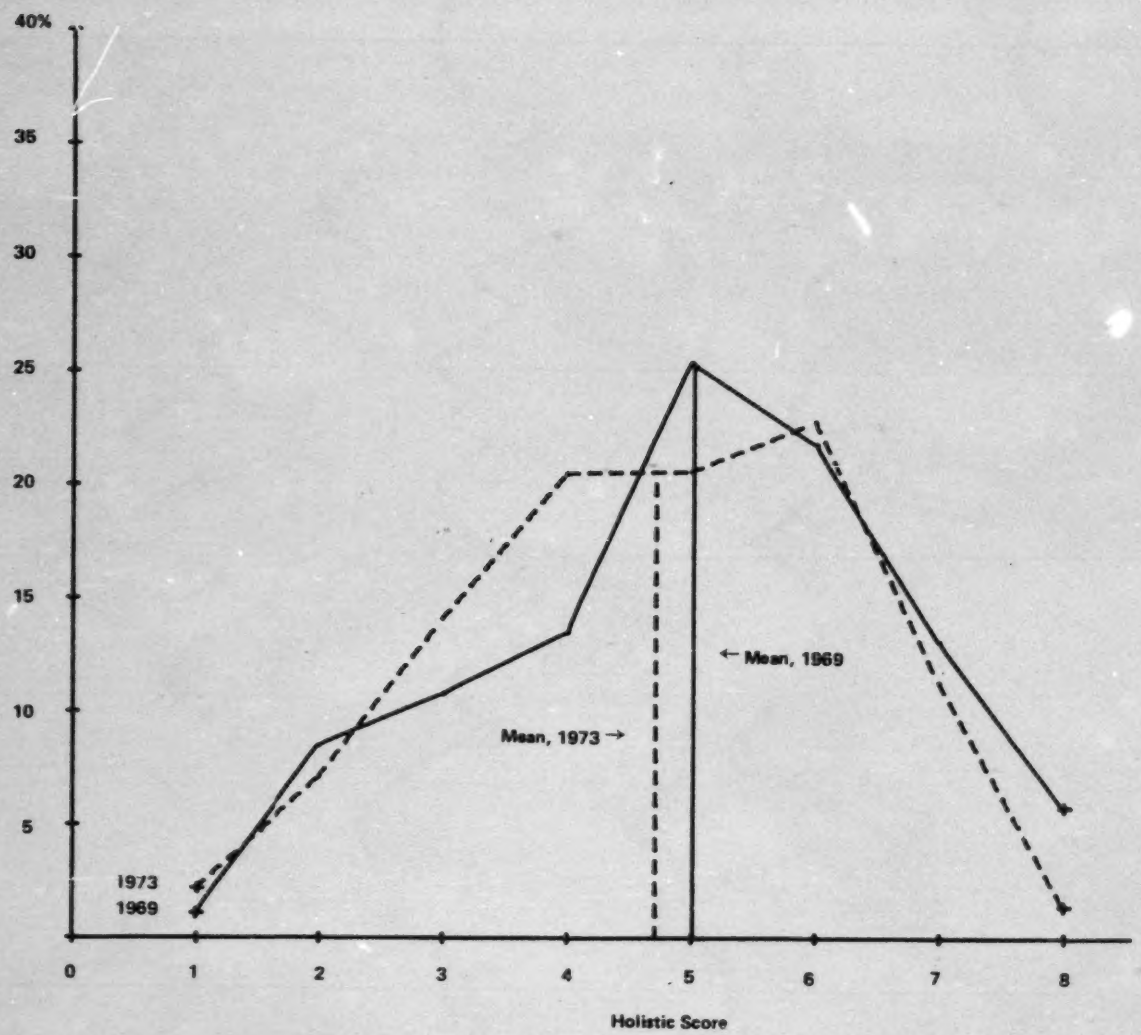


EXHIBIT 5. Percentages of Sentence Types, 1969 and 1973, 13-Year-Olds

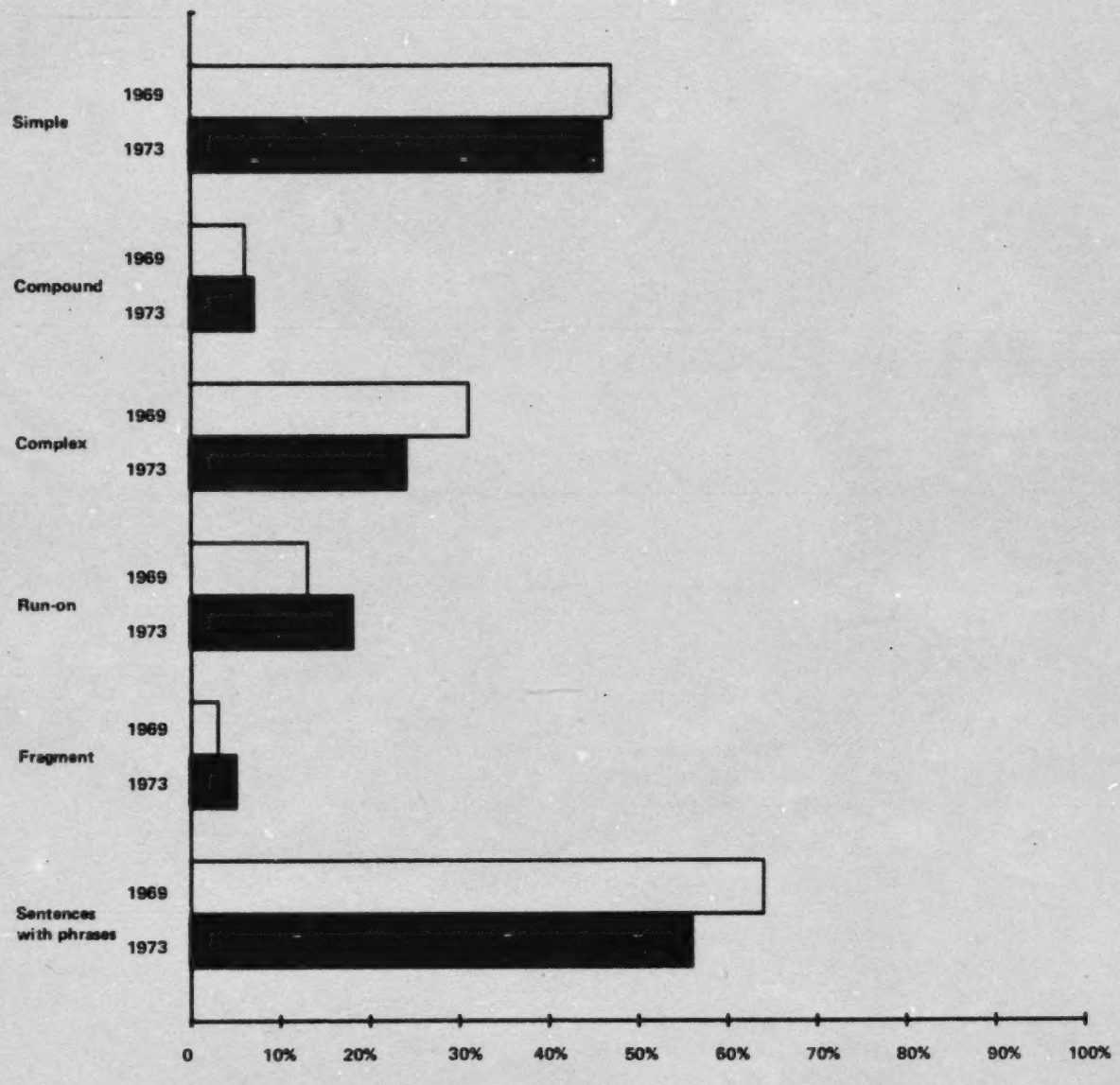
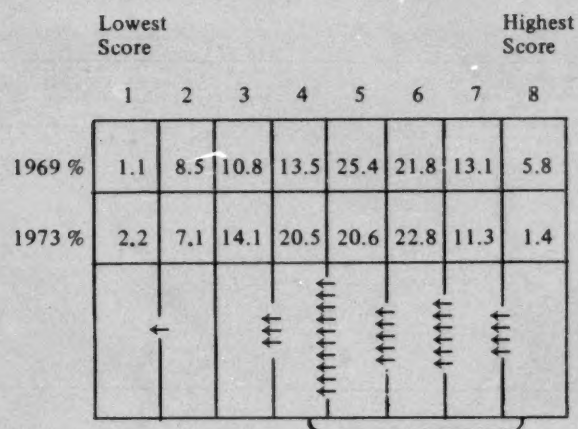


EXHIBIT 6. Changes in Essay Ratings, Age 13



The Range of the Essays

Exhibit 6 reveals that the shift in percentages of people at each score point was greatest near the center of the distribution. The proportion of high-quality papers (7s and 8s) dropped from 1 in 5 to 1 in 8 while the proportion of papers rated 4 did the reverse.

The shortening of essays is dramatized by three facts: in 1969, 25% of the papers were longer than 200 words, but in 1973, the proportion was 15%; 21% contained 15 or more sentences, but that dropped to 17%; and whereas 59% were made up of a single paragraph, in 1973, the proportion became 71%.

More observations about the essays as a group:

- Three out of every five essays contain no compound sentences at all.
- Whereas in 1969, 16% of the essays contained no complex sentences, in 1973 that proportion rose to 24%.
- In 1969, 58% of the students had no run-on sentences and 33% had up to two; in 1973, 46% had none and 44% had up to two.
- Twice the proportion of 13-year-olds (10%) wrote no sentences with phrases at all in 1973 than did so in 1969. Half as many (14%) wrote no awkward sentences in 1973.
- In 1969, 19% of the papers contained no coherent paragraph; in 1973 the figure was 28%.
- Seventy-one percent had no capitalization errors in 1969; now it is 56%.

- In both assessments half the papers contained no agreement errors.
- Eighty-seven percent of the writers made no structure word errors.
- Fifty percent made no word-choice errors.

Tables 15—17 display some characteristics of poor (holistic scores of 1, 2 or 3) and good (7s and 8s) papers. Note that the mean score of the low-quality papers did not change, but the score for the good papers declined two-tenths of a score point. In other words, the 1973 good papers are not as good as the 1969 ones; in addition, there are fewer of them. Although poor papers are somewhat longer and good ones are shorter, the good ones are still about four times as long as the poor ones.

The better papers are also more sophisticated: they contain almost three times the proportion of complex sentences, twice the proportion of sentences with phrases and almost twice the proportion of coherent paragraphs; and they evidence considerably greater mastery of conventions, having one-fourth as many run-ons, one-third the misspellings, one-eleventh as many fragments and less than half as many awkward sentences.

The average low paper seems to be getting more rambly: although it is shorter, it contains more words per paragraph and lacks focus.

TABLE 15. Average Poor and Good Essays Written by 13-Year-Olds, Counts

	1969		1973		Change	
	Poor	Good	Poor	Good	Poor	Good
Average holistic score	2.5	7.3	2.5	7.1	+†	- 0.2*
Average number of words/essay	54.5	227.2	62.5	210.8	8.0	-16.4
Average number of sentences/essay	4.1	15.6	4.1	15.1	+†	- 0.5
Average number of paragraphs/essay	1.4	3.3	1.2	2.7	- 0.2	- 0.6
Average number of punctuation marks	5.1	25.7	5.4	23.7	0.3	- 2.0
Average number of letters/word	3.8	4.1	3.8	4.1	+†	+†
Average number of words/sentence	17.7	15.3	21.6	14.5	3.9	- 0.8
Average number of words/paragraph	45.8	110.3	57.2	124.7	11.4*	14.4
Average number of sentences/paragraph	3.3	7.7	3.7	8.8	0.4	1.1

**Differences that are statistically significant are indicated by asterisks.*
†Plus signs equal rounded numbers less than 0.05 and rounded percents less than 0.5.

TABLE 16. Average Poor and Good Essays Written by 13-Year-Olds. Sentences

	1969				1973				Change			
	Poor		Good		Poor		Good		Poor		Good	
	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay
Simple sentences	2.2	46%	7.7	48%	1.9	35%	8.0	52%	-0.3	-11%	0.3	4%
Compound sentences	0.2	5	1.1	6	0.3	8	0.9	7	0.1	3	-0.2	1
Complex sentences	0.8	19	5.8	37	0.8	13	5.1	34	0.0	- 6	-0.7	-3
Run-ons	0.6	23	0.7	6	0.7	32	0.9	7	0.1	9	0.2	1
Fragments (incorrect)	0.2	6	0.3	2	0.4	11	0.1	1	0.2	5	-0.2	-1
Sentences with phrases	2.3	52	12.0	76	2.0	39	10.8	72	-0.3	-13*	-1.2	-4
Simple sentences with phrases	1.5	33	6.3	40	1.2	24	5.8	39	-0.3	- 9	-0.5	-1
Complex sentences with phrases	0.6	15	4.8	31	0.6	9	4.3	28	+†	- 6	-0.5	-3
Awkward sentences	1.0	30	2.0	14	1.5	44	2.6	18	0.5*	14*	0.6	4

**Differences that are statistically significant are indicated by asterisks.*
†Plus signs equal rounded numbers less than 0.05 and rounded percents less than 0.5.

TABLE 17. Average Poor and Good Essays Written by 13-Year-Olds, Spelling and Word-Choice Errors

	1969		1973		Change	
	Poor	Good	Poor	Good	Poor	Good
Average number of misspelled words	3.8	4.1	4.5	5.8	0.7	1.7
Average percent of misspelled words	6.4%	1.8%	7.8%	2.4%	1.4%	0.6%
Average number of word-choice errors	0.5	1.1	0.6	1.1	0.1	+†
Average percent of word-choice errors	0.9%	0.5%	0.9%	0.4%	+†	-0.1%

†Plus signs equal rounded numbers less than 0.05 and rounded percents less than 0.05.

Male-Female Differences

The mean holistic scores for both sexes dropped between 1969 and 1973, but the drop was greater for males (Tables 18—20).

Both sexes wrote shorter essays the second time, but males curtailed their writing more dramatically. The average male paper contained two fewer sentences, but the average sentence was four words longer; this probably caused a drop in coherence. In addition, males sharply reduced the proportion of simple sentences, complex sentences and sentences with phrases in the average essay, while increasing the proportions of run-ons, fragments, awkward sentences and agreement errors.

Females also reduced their proportion of complex sentences with or without phrases. The significant change in mean number of letters per word since 1969 suggests that the average female essay also contained a more-simplified vocabulary.

TABLE 18. Average Essays Written by Male and Female 13-Year-Olds, Counts

	1969		1973		Change	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Average holistic score	4.7	5.3	4.3	5.1	- 0.4	- 0.2
Average number of words/essay	134.4	154.7	115.8	140.5	-18.6	-14.2
Average number of sentences/essay	9.6	11.4	7.7	10.8	- 1.9*	- 0.6
Average number of paragraphs/essay	2.0	2.2	1.4	1.8	- 0.6*	- 0.4
Average number of punctuation marks	13.7	17.7	11.7	16.6	- 2.0	- 1.1
Average number of letters/word	4.0	4.0	3.9	3.9	- 0.1	- 0.1*
Average number of words/sentence	15.9	16.0	19.8	14.6	3.9*	- 1.4
Average number of words/paragraph	91.1	100.4	96.6	104.0	5.5	3.6
Average number of sentences/paragraph	6.7	7.4	6.3	8.0	- 0.4	0.6

**Differences that are statistically significant are indicated by asterisks.*

TABLE 19. Average Essays Written by Male and Female 13-Year-Olds, Sentences

	1969				1973				Change			
	Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female	
	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay
Simple sentences	5.1	49%	5.6	45%	3.8	42%	5.8	49%	-1.3*	- 7%*	0.2	4%
Compound sentences	0.6	7	0.8	5	0.5	7	0.7	7	-0.1	+†	-0.1	2
Complex sentences	2.9	28	3.7	33	2.0	21	3.0	27	-0.9*	- 7*	-0.7*	-6*
Run-ons	0.7	12	0.9	13	1.0	24	1.0	13	0.3*	12*	0.1	+†
Fragments (incorrect)	0.2	3	0.4	3	0.3	6	0.4	4	0.1	3*	0.0	1
Sentences with phrases	6.8	66	7.4	63	4.8	52	6.7	60	-2.0*	-14*	-0.7	-3
Simple sentences with phrases	3.9	37	3.8	32	2.7	30	3.9	33	-1.2*	- 7*	0.1	1
Complex sentences with phrases	2.4	24	3.0	26	1.6	17	2.3	22	-0.8*	- 7*	-0.7*	-4*
Awkward sentences	1.7	21	1.9	21	2.0	34	2.5	27	0.3	13*	0.6*	6*

**Differences that are statistically significant are indicated by asterisks.*
†Plus signs equal rounded percents less than 0.5.

TABLE 20. Average Essays Written by Male and Female 13-Year-Olds, Spelling and Word-Choice Errors

	1969		1973		Change	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Average number of misspelled words	5.8	4.2	6.1	4.6	0.3	0.4
Average percent of misspelled words	5.3%	3.0%	6.0%	3.6%	0.7%	0.6%
Average number of word-choice errors	0.8	1.1	0.7	0.9	-0.1	-0.2
Average percent of word-choice errors	0.6%	0.8%	0.7%	0.7%	0.1%	-0.1%

CHAPTER 6

9-YEAR-OLDS

A Profile of the Average Essay Written by a 9-Year-Old in 1974

The average essay written by a 9-year-old in 1974 was 55 words long, consisted of five sentences organized in one paragraph (Tables 21—24). Half of the sentences were simple, about one-quarter were complex and about one-quarter were run-ons and fragments. About half of all the sentences contained phrases. One in every five sentences was awkwardly written, and 1 in every 10 words was misspelled. About half of the paragraphs the hypothetical, average 9-year-old writes are coherent, and about 1 in 20 will be fully developed.

Changes in the Average Paper

The average 1974 essay may have been somewhat better than the 1970 essay but the change was not statistically significant (Exhibit 7). There were fewer 1s and 2s, slightly more 3s and more 5s, 6s and 7s.

The average essay became longer during this period, gaining 10 words, or about one sentence. This additional length, however, brought with it a loss of paragraph coherence as Table 23 reveals. In 1970 the average percentage of coherent paragraphs written by 9-year-olds was 57%; in 1974, the proportion was 43%. Apparently, the extra sentence

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TABLE 21. Average Essay Written by 9-Year-Olds, Counts

	1970	1974	Change
Average holistic score	3.8	4.1	0.3
Average number of words/essay	45.1	54.8	9.7*
Average number of sentences/essay	4.0	4.9	0.9*
Average number of paragraphs/essay	1.2	1.4	0.2*
Average number of punctuation marks	4.2	5.1	0.9*
Average number of letters/word	3.8	3.7	-0.1
Average number of words/sentence	13.9	15.0	1.1
Average number of words/paragraph	42.0	50.2	8.2*
Average number of sentences/paragraph	3.7	4.3	0.6*

**Differences that are statistically significant are indicated by asterisks.*

TABLE 22. Average Essay Written by 9-Year-Olds, Sentences

	1969		1974		Change	
	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay
Simple sentences	2.1	46%	2.4	42%	0.3	-4%
Compound sentences	0.2	6	0.3	5	0.1*	-1
Complex sentences	1.0	25	1.3	27	0.3*	2
Run-ons	0.4	15	0.5	19	0.1*	4
Fragments (incorrect)	0.3	7	0.3	6	+†	-1
Sentences with phrases	2.4	60	2.7	55	0.3*	-5
Simple sentences with phrases	1.5	36	1.6	29	0.1	-7*
Complex sentences with phrases	0.7	20	0.9	21	0.2*	1
Awkward sentences	0.7	25	0.8	19	0.1	-6*

**Differences that are statistically significant are indicated by asterisks.*
†Plus signs equal rounded numbers less than 0.05.

TABLE 23. Coherent Paragraphs, 9-Year-Olds

	1970		1974	
	Average Number	Average Percent	Average Number	Average Percent
National	0.6	57%	0.5*	43%*
Male	0.6	54	0.4	41*
Female	0.6	60	0.5*	45*
Low quality	0.3	32	0.2*	17*
High quality	1.0	98	1.2	85

**Difference from 1969 is statistically significant.*

EXHIBIT 7. Percentages of 9-Year-Olds at Each Holistic Score Point, 1970 and 1974

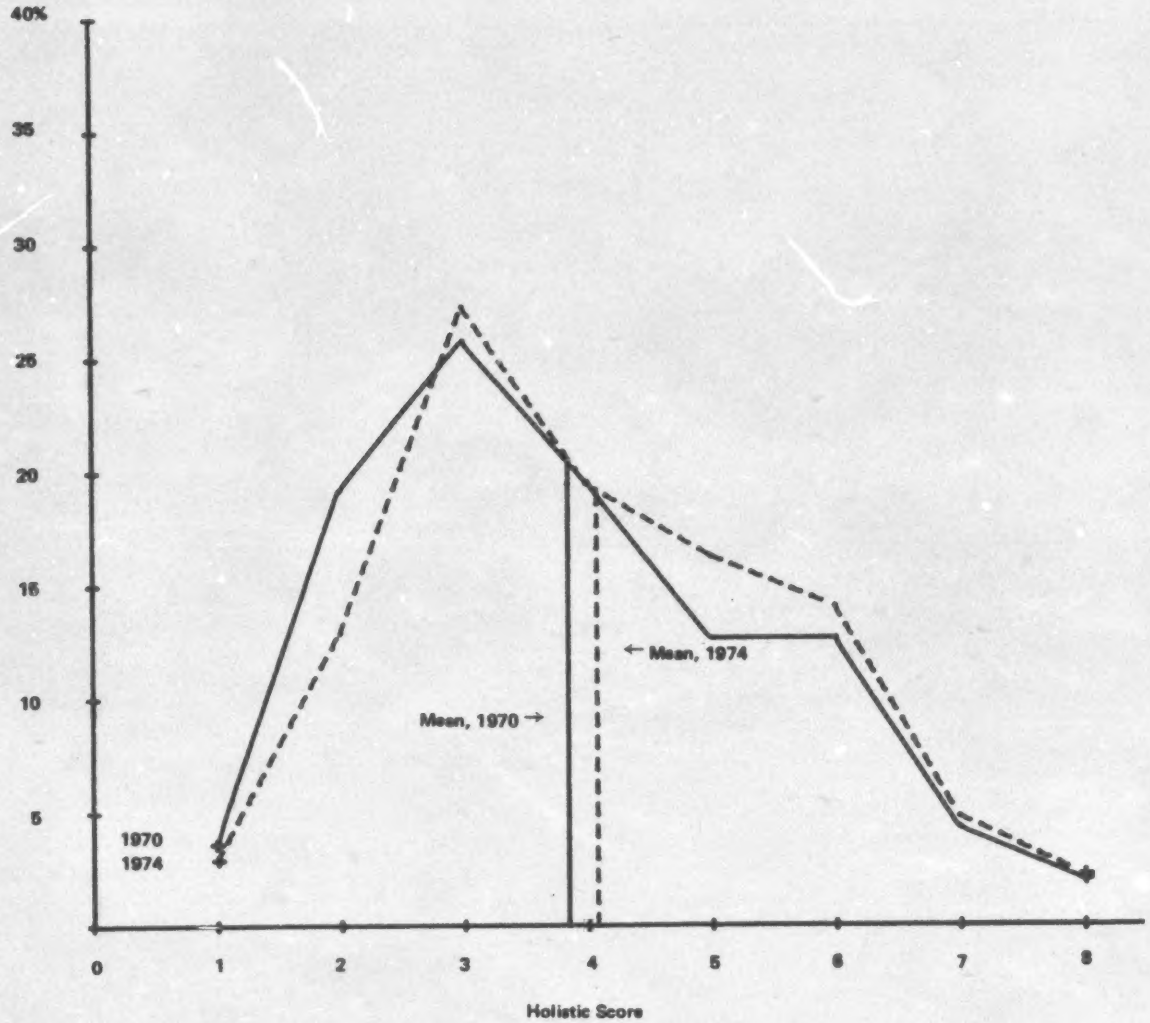


TABLE 24. Average Essay Written by 9-Year-Olds
Spelling and Word-Choice Errors

	1970	1974	Change
Average number of misspelled words	3.5	4.1	0.6*
Average percent of misspelled words	8.5%	8.4%	-0.1%
Average number of word-choice errors	0.5	0.5	+†
Average percent of word-choice errors	1.1%	1.0%	-0.1%

**Differences that are statistically significant are indicated by asterisks.*
†Plus signs equal rounded percents less than 0.05.

1974's 9-year-olds wrote often did not belong in the paragraph where it appeared.

The composition of the average essay did not change much: there was a slight increase in the proportion of complex sentences (with and without phrases) and an even slighter increase in proportion of run-ons, but the relative proportions of simple and compound sentences and fragments remained stable (Exhibit 8). The percentage of awkward sentences in the average essay dropped considerably. There was no change in the proportion of misspelled words.

The Range of the Essays

Exhibit 9 presents the percentages of papers at each score level in each assessment year. Notice that there were increases in the percentages of 3s, 5s, 6s, 7s and 8s, indicating improvement over a broad range of ability levels.

In order to put the average paper into perspective, consider the following observations about the papers as a group:

- In both assessments, at least three-quarters of the papers were shorter than 75 words and consisted of six or fewer sentences.
- In both, nine-tenths of the papers are one paragraph in length.
- In 1974, 96% of the paragraphs were not developed, i.e., did not have a topic sentence (expressed or implied) that was expanded upon or further developed with each sentence. In 1970, the proportion was 84%.
- In both assessments, 8 out of 10 papers contained no compound sentences.
- In both years, about 4 out of 10 essays contained no complex sentences. However, whereas one-fourth contained 2 or more in 1970, more than one-third contained 2 or more in 1974.
- In 1970, 30% of the papers contained at least one run-on sentence; in 1974 the proportion rose to 39%.
- The use of phrases to modify or elaborate upon subjects has increased. In 1970, 31% of the papers contained three to five sentences with phrases; in 1974, the proportion was 43%.
- In 1970, 53% of the essays contained awkward sentences; in 1974 that proportion dropped to 48%.
- In both years, one-third of the papers contained five or more misspellings.
- In both years, two-thirds of the papers contained no agreement errors.

EXHIBIT 8. Percentages of Sentence Types, 1970 and 1974, 9-Year-Olds

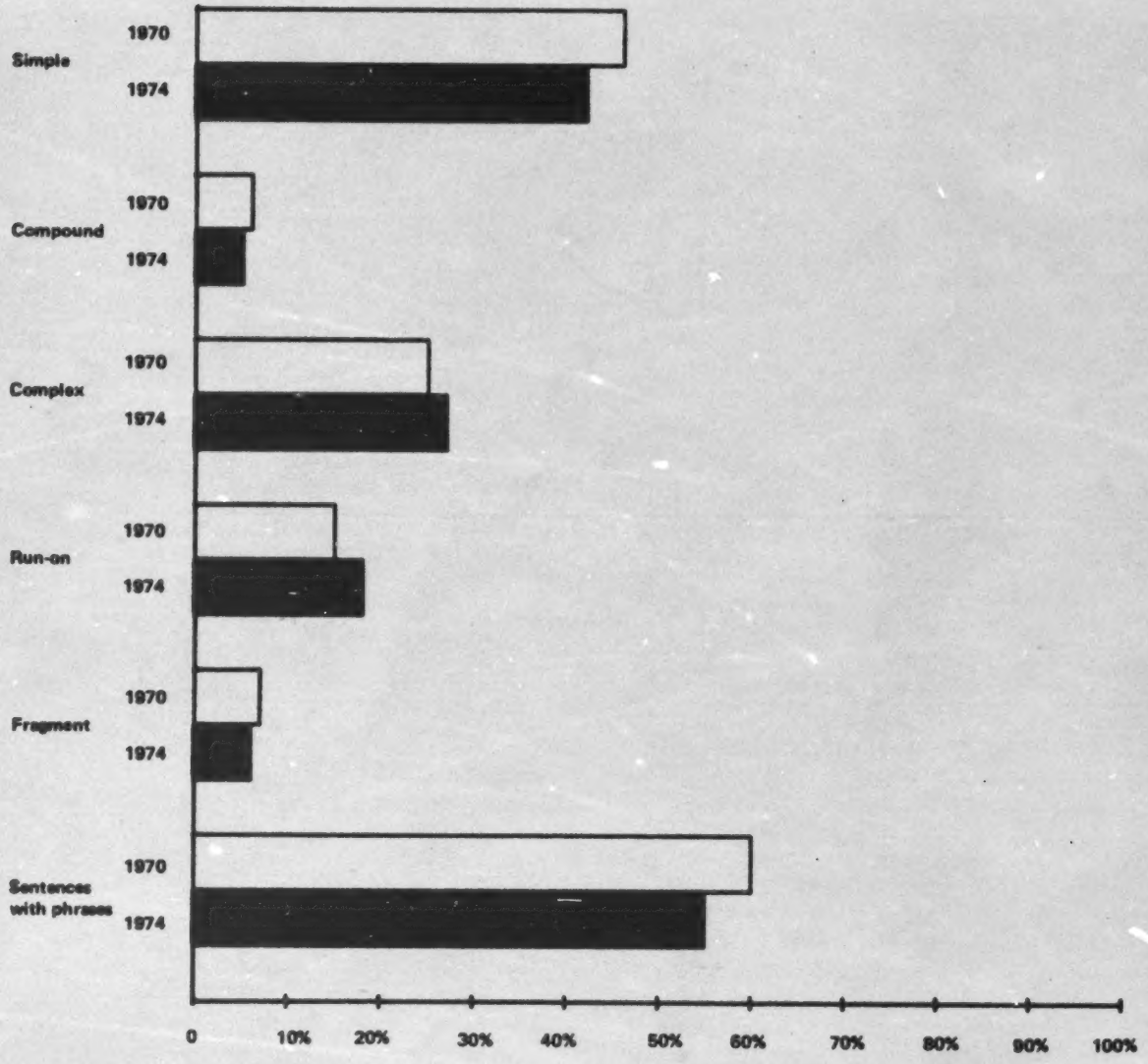
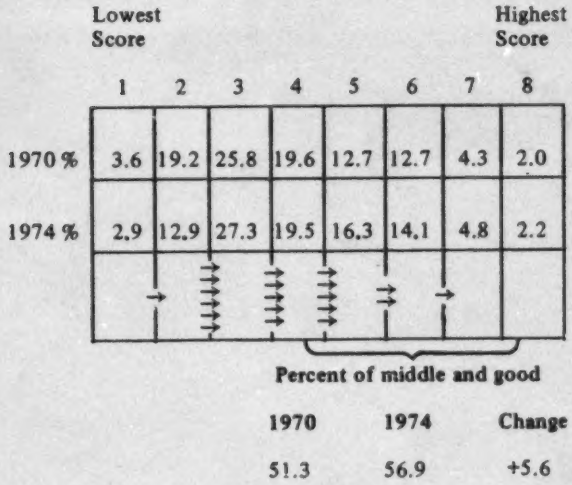


EXHIBIT 9. Changes in Essay Ratings, Age 9



- Between 1970 and 1974, the percent of papers containing one or more misspellings of plurals rose from 3% to 7%.
- In both assessments, 8 out of 10 essays contained no comma errors.
- In both assessments, 7 out of 10 essays contained no period errors.
- In both assessments, 7 out of 10 essays contained no word-choice errors.
- In both assessments, 9 out of 10 essays contained no structure word errors.
- In both assessments, one-third of the papers contained capitalization errors.

There are considerable differences between poor (ranked 1, 2 and 3) and good (ranked 7 and 8) essays as Tables 25—27 demonstrate. Good papers are about three times as long, contain four times the punctuation and employ somewhat longer sentences. As at the other age levels, high-ranking papers at age 9 contain greater proportions of complex sentences and smaller proportions of run-ons (mostly fused sentences) and fragments. The writers of high-ranking papers already know how to organize a paragraph coherently almost every time they write one, but most of the writers of poor papers are unable to do this. Writers of high-ranking essays are much better spellers.

TABLE 25. Average Poor and Good Essays Written by 9-Year-Olds, Counts

	1970		1974		Change	
	Poor	Good	Poor	Good	Poor	Good
Average holistic score	2.5	7.3	2.6	7.3	0.1	+†
Average number of words/essay	29.1	105.5	36.1	114.5	7.0*	9.0
Average number of sentences/essay	2.7	9.0	3.5	9.7	0.8*	0.7
Average number of paragraphs/essay	1.3	1.1	1.6	1.6	0.3	0.5
Average number of punctuation marks	2.6	10.6	3.1	12.3	0.5	1.7
Average number of letters/word	3.8	3.8	3.7	3.7	-0.1	-0.1
Average number of words/sentence	13.3	13.4	14.5	16.2	1.2	2.8
Average number of words/paragraph	26.8	101.5	31.5	93.8	4.7	-7.7
Average number of sentences/paragraph	2.4	8.6	2.8	8.0	0.4	-0.6

**Differences that are statistically significant are indicated by asterisks.*
†Plus signs equal rounded numbers less than 0.05.

TABLE 26. Average Poor and Good Essays Written by 9-Year-Olds, Sentences

	1970				1974				Change			
	Poor		Good		Poor		Good		Poor		Good	
	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay
Simple sentences	1.4	45%	4.6	46%	1.9	42%	4.5	41%	0.5	- 3%	-0.1	-5%
Compound sentences	0.1	7	0.6	6	0.2	6	0.6	7	0.1	- 1	+†	1
Complex sentences	0.6	24	2.6	28	0.7	23	2.9	32	0.1	- 1	0.3	4
Run-ons	0.3	14	0.9	15	0.4	21	1.0	15	0.1*	7	0.1	+†
Fragments (incorrect)	0.3	9	0.3	3	0.4	8	0.6	5	0.1	- 1	0.3	2
Sentences with phrases	1.5	60	5.3	56	1.7	50	5.1	52	0.2	-10*	-0.2	-4
Simple sentences with phrases	1.0	36	3.1	30	1.1	28	2.4	24	0.1	- 8	-0.7	-6
Complex sentences with phrases	0.4	20	1.8	21	0.5	17	2.1	23	0.1	- 3	0.3	2
Awkward sentences	0.6	28	1.4	15	0.8	24	1.1	14	0.2	- 4	-0.3	-1

**Differences that are statistically significant are indicated by asterisks.*
†Plus signs equal rounded numbers less than 0.05 and rounded percents less than 0.5.

TABLE 27. Average Poor and Good Essays Written by 9-Year-Olds, Spelling and Word-Choice Errors

	1970		1974		Change	
	Poor	Good	Poor	Good	Poor	Good
Average number of misspelled words	3.0	4.9	4.3	5.0	1.3*	0.1
Average percent of misspelled words	10.5%	4.5%	11.7%	4.0%	1.2%	-0.5%
Average number of word-choice errors	0.4	1.2	0.5	0.7	0.1	-0.5
Average percent of word-choice errors	1.6%	0.8%	1.6%	0.5%	+†	-0.3

**Differences that are statistically significant are indicated by asterisks.*
†Plus signs equal rounded numbers less than 0.05.

Male-Female Differences

As at the other two ages studied, 9-year-old girls are somewhat better writers than boys (Tables 28—30). The average female essay is longer than the average male essay, contains more complex sentences, contains less misspelling and is more likely to be somewhat better organized. However, between 1970 and 1974, girls increased considerably the proportion of run-on sentences in their essays while boys markedly cut down on their awkwardness.

TABLE 28. Average Essays Written by Male and Female 9-Year-Olds, Counts

	1970		1974		Change	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Average holistic score	3.6	4.1	3.8	4.3	0.2	0.2
Average number of words/essay	41.6	48.9	49.5	59.9	7.9*	11.0*
Average number of sentences/essay	3.5	4.6	4.4	5.3	0.9*	0.7
Average number of paragraphs/essay	1.1	1.4	1.4	1.4	0.3*	+†
Average number of punctuation marks	3.7	4.8	4.4	5.9	0.7	1.1
Average number of letters/word	3.8	3.8	3.7	3.8	-0.1	+†
Average number of words/sentence	14.9	12.8	14.1	15.9	-0.8	3.1
Average number of words/paragraph	40.6	43.4	45.2	55.0	4.6	11.6*
Average number of sentences/paragraph	3.4	3.9	3.9	4.7	0.5	0.8

**Differences that are statistically significant are indicated by asterisks.*
†Plus signs indicate rounded numbers less than 0.05.

TABLE 29. Average Essays Written by Male and Female 9-Year-Olds, Sentences

	1970				1974				Change			
	Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female	
	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay	Average Number of Sentences/ Essay	Average Percent of Sentences/ Essay
Simple sentences	1.8	47%	2.4	46%	2.3	45%	2.6	40%	0.5	-2%	0.2	-6%
Compound sentences	0.2	6	0.2	7	0.3	6	0.3	5	0.1	+†	0.1	-2
Complex sentences	0.9	24	1.2	27	1.1	25	1.5	29	0.2	1	0.3	2
Run-ons	0.4	16	0.4	13	0.5	17	0.5	20	0.1	1	0.1	7*
Fragments (incorrect)	0.3	7	0.3	7	0.4	6	0.3	6	0.1	-1	0.0	-1
Sentences with phrases	2.1	61	2.7	60	2.5	57	3.0	53	0.4	-4	0.3	-7
Simple sentences with phrases	1.3	36	1.7	36	1.5	32	1.6	27	0.2	-4	-0.1	-9*
Complex sentences with phrases	0.7	20	0.8	21	0.8	19	1.1	23	0.1	-1	0.3*	2
Awkward sentences	0.7	27	0.8	22	0.8	19	0.8	19	0.1	-8*	0.0	-3

**Differences that are statistically significant are indicated by asterisks.*
†Plus signs equal rounded percents less than 0.5.

TABLE 30. Average Essays Written by Male and Female 9-Year-Olds, Spelling and Word-Choice Errors

	1970		1974		Change	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Average number of misspelled words	3.4	3.6	4.1	4.2	0.7	0.6
Average percent of misspelled words	9.4%	7.6%	9.0%	7.9%	-0.4%	0.3%
Average number of word-choice errors	0.4	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.1	-0.1
Average percent of word-choice errors	1.2%	1.1%	1.2%	0.9%	+†	-0.2%

†Plus signs equal percents less than 0.05.

CHAPTER 7

WHAT MIGHT THIS MEAN?

Statistics about educational performance are difficult enough to interpret even when they deal with skills or knowledge acquired only in the schools. But the problems of understanding these particular findings are compounded by the fact that the subject at hand in its broadest sense is language. Children develop language skills before they attend school, and they employ language far more often in nonacademic than in academic settings. And although most training in written expression is acquired in the classroom, that training takes place within the larger context of "languaging" in general and cannot help but be heavily influenced by changing communications patterns in the culture at large.

In order to facilitate interpretation of these findings and encourage discussion of their implications, the National Assessment of Educational Progress invited two nationally recognized experts on writing and language to speculate about what might be happening to writing skills at these three age levels. Dr. Richard Lloyd-Jones of the University of Iowa (Iowa City) is incoming chairman of the Conference on College Composition and Communications, and Dr. Ross Winterowd of the University of Southern California (Los Angeles) is chairman of the National Council of Teachers of English Committee on Composition. Both visited with the National Assessment staff and offered the following observations about the writing assessment results.

General Comments About the Results

- There is no evidence here that the schools must "go back to basics"; indeed, the basics seem to be well in hand.

- The declines in holistic scores reveal as much about scorers as they do about students. Language is always changing, and scorers may prefer standards of written expression that are becoming outmoded. New standards are certainly different, but they may not be *worse* in any defensible sense.

- Our society provides less and less motivation for writing. As the necessity to write is diminished by the omnipresence of telephones and a growing cultural preference for visual communication, routine writing may move toward simpler forms as people do their "serious" communication where there are many visual cues.

- Writing is inextricably tied to reading: good readers are very often good writers and vice versa. If 1974's average 13- or 17-year-old has done less reading than 1969's, he or she could be expected to be a somewhat poorer writer.

- The "Edited Standard English" used as a writing model in most American schools is, after all, a dialect, the dialect one is supposed to master if one wants to succeed in this society. The dialect is thus an index of social aspiration, and a decline in the number of people learning or mastering it may have as much to do with changing attitudes toward society as it does to do with changing proficiency in writing.

- What are the "payoffs" for being a good writer in this society? A college education no longer guarantees greater lifetime earnings, there are fewer magazines and

newspapers than ever, business and personal communication depend primarily on the telephone and professions that do call for writing skill do not hold much social status. Perhaps motivation to write is on the wane.

- As classroom size increases, it becomes increasingly difficult for teachers to read essays so they tend to assign fewer and fewer of them. The less writing students do, the poorer they will be at written expression.

- Since the 1960s, free narrative, personal writing has been encouraged in the schools more than utilitarian writing. Perhaps this decline in a particular kind of writing skill is offset by advances in personal narrative.

17-Year-Olds

- Perhaps the college bound are as strongly motivated as ever. They know they need to be highly verbal to succeed, their courses involve more writing than most courses and they can see an immediate payoff. The assessment's "good" 17-year-old writers are probably college bound.

  The average 17-year-old, however, may not see any immediate advantage in being a good writer and has surely noticed that the culture is increasingly less print-oriented. He or she just cannot muster the motivation to master a skill that may never be called upon after school has ended.

- The drop in coherence at this age is difficult to interpret. Recent research in writing has demonstrated that there is a gap between textbooks about writing and the practice of professional writers. Whereas most textbooks stress the importance of the topic sentence for lending coherence to a paragraph, the truth is that few professional writers employ topic sentences at all. Regardless of what kinds of writing one examines, one is hard pressed to find organizational strategies resembling those that appear in the traditional writing curriculum. What many people are learning in the classroom is at odds with what they are learning by imitation of models.

- Coherence need not be achieved as it has been traditionally — through the use of topic sentences, carefully linked transitions, repetition of key words and so on. Indeed, television and movies achieve narrative coherence with very few of the old literary devices. It is quite possible that today's writers have absorbed some of the techniques of visual coherence from their thousands of hours of television viewing, and what appears "incoherent" to us today will someday be very easy to understand. At the moment, however, the trend is disturbing.

- Perhaps 17-year-olds would respond more enthusiastically to a different essay task. Although this probably would not affect the changes in mechanics, it might affect the holistic scores. Writing and reading competencies are heavily influenced by attitudes; a change in motivation can prompt major changes in competency.

13-Year-Olds

- Thirteen-year-olds do not face the pressures 17-year-olds face so there is no evidence yet of polarization of good and bad writers. The general decline in quality at this age may simply be another reflection of a society-wide change in attitude toward writing.

- The general movement toward a simpler, "primer" style of writing is not encouraging and deserves much closer study.

9-Year-Olds

- Nine-year-olds are still excited about language. Their enthusiasm for personal expression and their willingness to fantasize more than compensate for their inexperience with writing.

- The 9-year-old writing task was very different from the task assigned to the older students. It tapped a natural curiosity, prompted a creative response and was far less "schoolish."

Some Suggestions

When we do not know what is causing a change in performance, it is difficult to recommend strategies for arresting or furthering it. Nonetheless, several courses of action seem clear:

- There should be further analysis of the data to focus on specific problem areas and the achievements of specific groups of people.

- Both educators and parents should examine their assumptions about the importance of writing skills in this culture and the significance of declines in those skills.

- Ideally, remedial writing laboratories should be available to all students as resource centers where trained professionals can respond to particular problems as they arise. Such writing laboratories would be more effective than remedial programs that are curriculum oriented.

- If we want better writing, we need to require more of it; if we require more of it, we need more full- or part-time people to respond constructively to what is written.

- We have to recognize that teaching grammar is not teaching writing. Grammar is an important subject in its own right; there is no correlation, however, between ability to describe language and ability to use it.

APPENDIX A

THE WRITING TASKS

Ages 13 and 17

Everybody knows of something that is worth talking about. Maybe you know about a famous building like the Empire State Building in New York City or something like the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. Or you might know a lot about the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City or the new sports stadium in Atlanta or St. Louis. Or you might be familiar with something from nature, like Niagara Falls, a gigantic wheat field, a grove of orange trees, or a part of a wide, muddy river like the Mississippi. .

There is probably something you can describe. Choose something you know about. It may be something from around where you live, or something you have seen while traveling, or something you have studied in school. Think about it for a while and then write a description of what it looks like so that it could be recognized by someone who has read your description.

Name what you are describing and try to use your best writing.

Age 9

Here is a picture of a kangaroo in Australia. Look at the picture for a while. What do you think is happening? Where do you suppose the kangaroo came from? Where do you think he is going? Look how high he jumps! Why do you suppose he is jumping over the fence?

Write a story about what is happening in the picture.

APPENDIX B

SCORING GUIDES

These scoring and descriptive guides were designed to allow the writer as much flexibility as possible under existing rules of correct writing; consequently, any time two authorities on mechanics disagreed the most informal interpretation was used.

If a paper was illegible, which meant it was undecipherable and could not be intelligibly interpreted, it was designated as such and received no further scoring. Whenever a writer simply copied stems or listed spelling words, the paper was considered legible but meaningless and received no further scoring. If neither of these situations applied, then the scorer proceeded to score the following: paragraphs, sentences, punctuation, agreement, awkwardness, spelling, word choice and capitalization.

Paragraphs

There were three possible descriptions for a paragraph: paragraph used, paragraph coherent and paragraph developed. Every paper had at least one paragraph so it fell into one of these three categories.

Paragraph used indicated the paragraph was, essentially, a visual device. The writer used indentation, skipped a line or stopped in the middle of a line and started back at the margin but the paragraph was neither coherent nor developed. The one-sentence paragraph generally was placed in this category.

Paragraph coherent indicated an interconnectedness among sentences and among the ideas of those sentences. The relationship of each sentence's idea to the ideas that preceded and followed it was clear. In other words, when reading a coherent paragraph, the reader should never have been confused about the order of its parts or their relationship to each other. Paragraphs that were overdeveloped — that is, contained two or more coherent paragraphs — were marked coherent.

Paragraph developed indicated that the paragraph had an expressed or an implied topic sentence, which identified and limited the central area of concern in the paragraph, and that each additional sentence, in an orderly manner, added to or explained something about the main idea embodied in the topic sentence.

Sentences

Every sentence in an essay was categorized.

A *fused* sentence contained two or more independent clauses with no punctuation or conjunction separating them. If, however, the first word of the second independent clause was capitalized, each sentence was scored separately and the paper was given an endmark error. Sentences that were scored as fused were not also given a semicolon punctuation error as that would have resulted in scoring the same error twice.

On and on sentences consisted of four or more independent clauses strung together with conjunctions, a conventional mark of punctuation or a combination of both. The conjunctions did not all need to be the same.

A *comma splice* was noted whenever two or more independent clauses were joined by a comma instead of a semicolon or a coordi-

nating conjunction. Again, if the first word of the second independent clause was capitalized, each sentence was scored separately and the paper was given an end-mark error.

Whenever a writer wrote three independent clauses, one fused and one spliced, it was scored as a comma splice.

An *incorrect sentence fragment* was any word group, other than an independent clause, written and punctuated like a sentence. All fragments were automatically counted as awkward; therefore, they were not individually scored as such. However, fragments containing agreement errors were so scored. When the subject of a sentence was understood, the sentence was considered complete.

A *correct fragment* was one used in dialogue, for emphasis, or as an exclamation.

A *simple sentence* was a sentence that contained a subject and a verb and may have had an object or a subject complement.

A *simple sentence with phrase* was any simple sentence that contained a phrase, regardless of the phrase's function in the sentence. Phrases were loosely defined as any closely related group of words that did not contain both a noun and a verb. They included prepositional, infinitive, gerund and participial phrases, as well as appositives, nominative absolutes and verbals.

A *compound sentence* was two or more independent clauses joined by something other than a comma.

A *compound sentence with phrase* contained at least one phrase in one of the independent clauses.

Complex and compound-complex sentences contained at least one independent clause and one dependent clause, which was defined as a group of words that could not stand alone as a sentence but contained both a subject and a verb. A writer was given credit for using a dependent clause regardless of its function in the sentence unless the clause was the object of a preposition, in which case only the phrase was scored.

A *complex and compound-complex sentence with phrase* contained at least one dependent clause and one phrase. Included in this category were dialogue and sentences containing parenthetical expressions that were clauses.

Punctuation

Every punctuation error was scored at the point where the error occurred, as opposed to grouping them together at the end of each sentence. Errors of commission and errors of omission were scored for commas, dashes, quotation marks, semicolons, apostrophes and end marks. The guidelines for scoring were based on the most informal rules of usage. The writer was generally given the benefit of any doubt.

Rules used were:

A. Commas and dashes

1. A series of three or more nouns, verbs, phrases or dependent clauses must be separated by commas. *The comma before the conjunction is optional unless the items in series are dependent clauses.*

   There should be no comma after the last word in a series unless a complete sentence follows. In this case, however, a dash is more acceptable.

   If the series occurs within a sentence, which is complete without it, a dash must precede and follow the series.

   If there is a coordinating conjunction between each item in the series, there is no punctuation.

2. Two or more equal adjectives must be separated by commas if there is no coordinating conjunction. There is no comma between the last adjective and the noun it modifies.

3. A nonrestrictive modifier — appositive, phrase or clause — must be set off from the rest of the sentence with commas. A nonrestrictive modifier describes and adds information but does not point out or identify; the sentence does not change radically or become meaningless when the modifier is omitted.

4. Commas must precede and follow titles and degrees (when they follow a name) and they must follow elements in dates, places and addresses.

   Roman numerals are not punctuated.

   The comma between a month and a year is optional when there is no date. *But*, if there is one after the month then there must be one after the year.

5. Commas must separate a noun in direct address from the rest of the sentence.

6. When a dependent clause, gerund phrase or absolute phrase starts a sentence, it must have a comma after it.

7. When a long (arbitrary five or more words) prepositional phrase starts a sentence, it must be followed by a comma. If it is short and there is no possibility of confusion, the comma is optional.

8. Separate mild interrupters from the rest of the sentence with commas.

   Mild interrupters may be parenthetical expressions (by the way, on the other hand, in my opinion), transitional words (nevertheless, consequently, therefore, however), well, yes, no at the beginning of a sentence.

   NOTE: The benefit of the doubt was given with well, yes, no at the beginning of a sentence. If the writer omitted the comma and the meaning was clear, a comma was not required.

9. Dashes indicate a sudden change of thought in a sentence.

10. Dashes indicate a summarizing thought or an afterthought added to the end of a sentence.

11. A transitional expression preceded by a colon, semicolon, comma or dash is followed by a comma.

B. Quotation marks

1. In dialogue, quotation marks must go around what is said. Separate who said it from what is said with commas. Periods and commas go inside quotation marks. Must be clearly inside or is an error.

2. If one set of quotation marks is present, there must be two. Mark one error. Location of quotation marks other than for dialogue is the writer's prerogative.

   NOTE: It was not considered an error if single marks were used instead of double marks.

C. Colon

1. A complete sentence introducing a series must have a colon after it.

2. When an introductory statement contains anticipatory words ("the following," "as follows," "these," "thus," etc.), there must be a colon before the series.

3. A colon must be used if the series is listed on separate lines.

4. Use a colon when a formal quotation is introduced without using a form of the verb "to say."

NOTE: The benefit of the doubt was given in other cases of colon use. A writer did not receive a punctuation error unless it was *clearly* incorrect.

D. Semicolon

1. If a compound sentence has commas in both of the independent clauses, a semicolon must precede the conjunction.

2. If a comma is used for one rule in a sentence and if a comma is needed for a second rule but to use it would cause confusion, a semicolon must be used for the rule that creates the longest pause. (The semicolon must continue to be used in every place where that rule applies in the sentence.)

3. Two independent clauses can be separated by a semicolon or a semicolon and a connector. (The comma after the connector is optional.)

NOTE: In cases where the semicolon was missing, the student was not scored for a punctuation error as this had already been done when the sentence was designated as fused.

If a compound sentence had a comma in one of the independent clauses, the writer could have used a semicolon, comma or no mark at all preceding the conjunction without being scored for an error.

E. End marks

Every "sentence" had to have some type of end punctuation if the next "sentence" started with a capital letter.

NOTE: End punctuation was not scored for appropriateness.

If the writer omitted end punctuation but began the next sentence with a capital letter, a punctuation error was scored rather than a fused sentence.

If there was no end mark following a fragment, the error was not scored unless the fragment occurred at the end of the essay.

F. Apostrophe

1. An apostrophe s ('s) is used to form the possessive of nouns, singular or plural, not ending in s.

2. Use 's or ' to form the possessive of singular nouns ending in s.

NOTE: The benefit of the doubt was given in this category, particularly on cases concerning proper names.

3. Use ' without s to form the possessive of plural nouns ending in s.

4. Use 's to form the possessive of indefinite pronouns.

5. Use 's with the last noun to show joint possession in a pair or series.

Use 's with each noun in a pair or series when each noun is possessing something separately.

NOTE: The benefit of the doubt was given when the intended meaning was not clear from the context.

6. Use ' to show omissions or contractions.

NOTE: Plurals of numerals, letters, symbols and words involving the apostrophe were scored under spelling.

An unformed possessive or an unnecessary possessive was scored as a word-choice error for wrong case.

Additional Comments About Scoring Punctuation:

1. Credit was always given for use of the least-sophisticated punctuation.

2. Punctuation errors that were not defined in the guide were disregarded.

3. Run-on sentences were not scored for colons, semicolons or end marks — unless the end mark was missing at the very end of the essay or unless the next sentence began with a capital letter. Errors in internal commas, quotation marks and apostrophes were scored.

Agreement

A sentence was scored for an agreement error if at least one error was present. Multiple errors were not scored. Agreement took precedence over spelling and word-choice errors.

Rules used for subject/verb and pronoun/antecedent agreement were:

A. A compound subject with an "and" takes a plural.

EXCEPTION: Compound subjects connected by "and" but expressing a singular idea take a singular.

B. A collective noun takes a singular when referring to the group as a unit but takes a plural when the members are active as individuals.

C. Some nouns are written as plurals but have a singular meaning. When used as subjects, they take a singular.

D. Some nouns are written as plurals but have a singular meaning. When they are subjects, they take a plural:

proceeds	trousers
scissors	pants
goods	

E. Some nouns have the same form in the plural as in the singular. These nouns take the singular or the plural depending on the context of the sentence.

EXAMPLES:
The series of concerts looks exciting.
Both series of concerts look exciting.

F. Many nouns ending in "ics" (economics, statistics, politics, ethics, etc.) take a singular or plural depending on how they are used. When they refer to a body of knowledge or a course of study, they are singular. When they refer to qualities or activities, they are plural.

A title is singular.

EXAMPLE:
The Canterbury Tales is a comedy.

G. After who, which or that, the verb must agree with the clause's antecedent — the noun to the left of who, which or that.

H. Time, amounts of money and quantities are singular.

I. When a phrase is the subject of a sentence, a singular verb must be used.

Rules used for noun/modifier agreement were:

A. "A" is used before all consonant sounds, including sounded "h" — a house; long "u" — a unit; and "o" with the sound of a w — a one-week workshop.

NOTE: The article before humble must be "a."

B. "An" is used before all vowel sounds, including silent "h" — an hour; short "u" — an umpire.

NOTE: If the word was misspelled and the modifier agreed with the misspelling, an agreement error was not scored — an umble man, an ouse.

Rules used for subject/object pronoun usage were:

A. Subject pronouns — I, you, he, she, it, we, they, who. Use when the pronoun is the subject of a verb.

B. Object pronouns — me, you, him, her, it, us, them, whom. Use when the pronoun is the direct object, the object of the preposition or the subject or object of an infinitive.

Rules used for tense shifts within a sentence were:

A. Use present perfect with present or present progressive.

B. Use past perfect with past or past progressive.

C. Use future perfect with future or future progressive.

Definitions of Tenses

A. Present tense — happening now.

B. Past tense — happened any time in the past.

C. Future tense — will happen any time in the future.

D. Present perfect — refers to an action that was completed in the past but is part of a series of actions that the writer assumes will continue in the present.

E. Past perfect — refers to an action that was completed in the past before another event occurred.

F. Future perfect — refers to an action that will be completed by a specific time in the future.

G. Present progressive — refers to an action that *is* in progress.

H. Past progressive — refers to an action that *was* in progress.

I. Future progressive — refers to an action that *will be* in progress.

Awkward

A sentence was scored for awkwardness once, regardless of the number of faults in that sentence. If a sentence could be fixed several ways, the various changes involving more than one word, the sentence was scored as awkward. The scorers were cautioned to score what they saw — not what they thought they saw. It was very easy for a scorer to automatically edit a sentence or force an interpretation, which corrected an awkward sentence. Scorers were also advised to check for conjunction errors before scoring a sentence as awkward.

Rules for determining awkwardness were as follows:

A. Faulty subordination — putting the main idea into a dependent clause and a secondary idea into a main clause.

B. Unclear pronoun antecedent.

EXAMPLE:
Peter was asked to bring in Mr. Cary's report when he came in.

C. Dangling (misplaced) modifier.

NOTE: Benefit of the doubt was given on word placement.

D. Omitted or extra words.

1. When part of the verb (auxiliary or main) was missing. When the subject or the entire verb was missing, the sentence was scored as a fragment.

2. Two similar adjectives were scored awkward for redundance.

EXAMPLE:
the big, huge river

3. Other redundancies were also scored as awkward.

EXAMPLE:
Where is it at?

4. A double negative was scored awkward for extra words.

E. Faulty coordination

Two or more independent clauses that are written as one sentence but are not logically related.

F. Mixed or illogical constructions like faulty parallelism.

G. Split construction.

1. A split infinitive occurs when a modifier is inserted between "to" and the verb form.

NOTE: There are occasions when splitting an infinitive produces the smoothest sentence. The scorers were told to use their own judgment.

2. Separation of subject and verb, parts of a verb, or verb and object can be awkward.

Words — Spelling

Each misspelled word was scored (agreement took precedence over spelling) into one of the following categories:

A. Reversal — This type of misspelling is the result of a perception problem related to reading. The student who has difficulty with reversal will make the same mistake throughout the paper.

1. Letter reversal — The student writes a letter backwards (b/d) or upside down (m/w, b/p, u/n) and in so doing forms another letter. This includes q/g confusion if the error is consistent throughout the paper.

2. Word reversal — The student reverses the order of letters in a word (was/saw). This fault usually involves two- or three-letter words and will appear more than once in the paper.

NOTE: A reversed letter that did not result in a different letter (g, 7, j) was not scored. The benefit of the doubt was given in n/m, i/e, u/w discrepancies.

B. Plural

1. Plural not formed (clearly not an agreement problem).

EXAMPLE:
United State

2. Plural formed incorrectly.

C. Phonetic attempt — Spelling the desired word in a manner that reflected the correct pronunciation of the word; an incorrect spelling that, when pronounced aloud, sounded like the correct pronunciation of a legitimate word that would fit into context.

Homonym confusion was included in this category and was not scored as a word-choice error. The scorers were told to use their own judgment in scoring for a phonetic attempt.

D. Other spelling error — included wrong word division at the end of a line, beginning a sentence with a numeral, making two words into one (alot), making one word into two ([room mate]), superfluous plurals (parkings lots), groups of distinguishable letters that did not make a legitimate word, groups of distinguishable letters that did not reflect the correct pronunciation of the desired word.

NOTE: A "misspelling" that resulted in another word was to be scored within the context of its sentence. It was up to the scorer to determine whether this was a spelling error or a word-choice error.

Abbreviations or any mistakes associated with abbreviations (spelling, punctuation) were not scored as errors.

Word Choice

A word-choice error resulted when one word was used instead of another, which would clearly have been better. If a particular word could have been changed one or more ways, any of which would have corrected the diction error, the word was scored as a word-choice error. Each word, considered to be an incorrect choice, was scored into one of the following categories:

A. Structure word error. The writer needed a preposition or conjunction but used the wrong one. Conjunction here refers to coordinating and subordinating conjunctions.

NOTE: The *American Heritage Dictionary* accepts "in" for "into" and "on" for "onto" as informal usage.

"Like" for "as," "like" for "as if" or "as though," "if" for "whether" are gaining acceptance. They were *not* scored as errors.

B. Other word-choice errors included form words (nouns, verbs, adjectives or adverbs) that were off by some shade of meaning and words to which the scorer could not assign *any* or *only one* logical meaning. Other word-choice errors included the following:

1. Wrong principle part of the verb (clearly *not* agreement or awkward).

EXAMPLES:
The bicycle was broke.
the stole treasure

2. Attempted verb, adjective or adverb forms that are nonexistent or unacceptable.

EXAMPLES:
beautifulest
busted

NOTE: Other word-choice errors took precedence over other spelling errors when a wrong word was misspelled.

Agreement and awkward took precedence over other word-choice errors and structure words. If a particular word could have been changed one or more ways, any of which would have corrected the diction error, the word was scored

as an Other Word-Choice Error. If the sentences could have been fixed several ways, the sentence was scored as awkward.

Capitalization

Words were scored as capitalization errors in the following situations:

A. When the first word in a sentence was not capitalized.

B. When proper nouns or adjectives within a sentence were not capitalized.

C. When the pronoun I was not capitalized.

Papers written or printed in all capital letters were not scorable for capitalization.

Illegible Word

Scorers were asked to try to decipher handwriting as best they could. If they were able to decide what a questionable word was, they were told to trace the letters or rewrite above the word. If a word could not be determined, it was scored as illegible. If letters could be distinguished, the word was scored as an other spelling error.

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